



Greater Hartford Legal Aid

Human Services Committee, February 10, 2010  
Testimony submitted by Lucy Potter, Attorney  
Greater Hartford Legal Aid

5432, AN ACT CONCERNING LIMITS ON SANCTIONS UNDER THE TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES PROGRAM, support  
840, AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES FOR PARTICIPANTS IN THE JOBS FIRST PROGRAM, support with amended language submitted by Jane McNichol, LARCC  
5558, AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR RECIPIENTS OF TEMPORARY FAMILY ASSISTANCE BENEFITS UNDER THE JOBS FIRST PROGRAM, support.  
6218, AN ACT ESTABLISHING A TASK FORCE ON SAFETY NET SERVICES, support with amended language submitted by Jane McNichol, LARCC.

I am an attorney at Greater Hartford Legal Aid and have represented many clients who seek cash and medical help from DSS. I am one of the attorneys in the Raymond v. Rowland case, which has a settlement agreement in effect to help ensure access to DSS for people with disabilities.

Bills 5432, 840 and 5558 all seek a more constructive approach in the Temporary Family Assistance work program. They would broaden the ability of participants to get a high school diploma or engage in other educational activities and limit sanctions only to the household members who don't follow the rules. It is also worth asking why isn't this person doing what the program asks? Often, there are underlying problems: cognitive issues, domestic violence or other health issues. There is no point in penalizing people who are unable to meet program requirements. With a new administration it is time to reexamine the goals of the program. Let's focus more on doing what it takes to get people back to work, with job support, education and, where appropriate, treatment or other measures needed to support fragile families. I would endorse the modifications that Jane McNichol of LARCC suggests in her testimony, which proposes a cost neutral pilot to introduce such changes.

6218 would set up a task force on safety net services to improve access to a range of programs that support low income people, and to improve the programs themselves, including the Temporary Family Assistance program. Again, I support the amended language that Jane McNichol proposes to expand the composition of the group to include consumers and advocates.

DSS is really broken right now. I have not reached a DSS worker by phone literally for months. I leave messages and get call backs perhaps half the time and usually several days later. I communicate primarily by email with c.c's to the two

Greater Hartford Legal Aid, Inc.

999 Asylum Avenue, 3FL, Hartford, CT 06105-2465 • Tel: 860. 541. 5000 • Fax: 860. 541. 5050 • TTY: 860. 541. 5069 •

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supervising levels above the worker I am trying to reach. Even so, it often takes a week to get a response. The difficulty getting through is obviously greater for those who aren't lawyers. This is not acceptable in an agency intended to help people with extra barriers getting along in life.

DSS has said that it plans to address these issues with "modernization." Modernization would include improved phones, document imaging and on line applications. This would enable a reallocation of work so that cases can be handled more efficiently. Most other states have made much more progress in modernization than Connecticut has. Commissioner Starkowski presented a power point to this committee last June that set forth how modernization would work here and said implementation would begin in January 2011. Here we are in February, 2011 and DSS is still negotiating the contract.

Meanwhile, Connecticut is ranked 53<sup>rd</sup> for its negative error rate in the SNAP (food stamps) program. And DSS is overdue in processing a third of its SNAP cases and 87% of its expedited SNAP cases. (For those in dire need, SNAP can be granted in seven days with a streamlined application.) This represents a significant decline after a little improvement over the summer when more workers were hired to address the backlog. FNS has been monitoring Connecticut very closely over the past year and threatening a sanction. There is real danger of a fiscal sanction. Connecticut was sanctioned for \$2M in 2002 for its error rate. Processing times in Medicaid and other programs have also dropped even further in the last year.

The Malloy administration has voiced a strong commitment to preserving the safety net. In order to do so DSS has to be functional. The people in Connecticut who need help deserve much better.